

Postscripts by Jack Post

One of the charms of antique collecting is the feeling that you are yourself exploring a path back into history. The piece of silver that you hold in your hand may have been crafted in Regency England or Colonial America; the platter may have come home in the Clippers. So it is with decoys, those hand-made lures for ducks and geese, snipe or swans. The one you hold may derive from the Cape or the Chesapeake, from Maine or Maryland; and just by looking, the true expert can tell its origin, and often who carved it.

Dr. George Starr of Duxbury is just such an expert. One day in my house he looked at a cork decoy that had belonged to my grandfather. It was retrieved from a shelf above my gunrack and handed to George who said he thought it came from Long Island, probably around Bayport. He was right, for that was where my grandfather had often shot ducks, and this one had been brought first to New Jersey by my father, then to Duxbury by myself.

This knowledge George Starr has collected in a fascinating volume called *Decoys Of The Atlantic Flyway*, which in some 300 pages discusses decoys from Maine to North Carolina, illustrating the text with pictures and superb color plates, so that a student of this early form of American craftsmanship can learn for himself from this book what to expect in any local area, and then how to recognize what he sees.

Here is far more than a textbook, for the instruction is interwoven with background stories and anecdotes that recreate an era in the natural history of the east coast that can never be repeated, a time when clouds of ducks and geese blackened the sun, and baymen made a handsome living market-gunning thousands of birds for the tables of Delmonico's or Sherry's or for the banquets of the barons of industry. Just as with the buffalo or the carrier pigeon, there was little thought of wastage of natural resources. The birds were here to be harvested, millions of them; so skilled professionals in a difficult trade made a business of killing ducks and selling them. The sportsman, the conservator, came later when the wildfowl population had diminished to thousands. The rebuilding era had to wait until the last quarter century with its strict game laws and the advent of Ducks Unlimited.

Decoys are a necessary tool to the harvesting of waterfowl, a stylistic tool, often modified to suit the requirements of local conditions. Just as an early settler would construct a table or waterbench to suit his personal needs, so a duck hunter carved his decoys, sometimes in slapdash fashion, more often with care, and sometimes superb craftsmanship. Masters come to the top in every trade, and there were many in decoy making; and just as the best of the early silversmiths or the cabinet makers are known to us, so are the decoy makers, not a few of them men of great skill and distinction.

The difficulty lies in finding examples of their work. Very seldom nowadays are decoys hand carved; for machine-made models are available at low prices. Thus scarcity has turned decoys into collectibles, attracting all manner of opportunists into a field that a couple of generations ago was the exclusive domain of the gunners. The old timers resent this, and many of the tales in *Decoys Of The Atlantic Flyway* revolve around their refusal to let their very personal work slip into the grasping hands of outlanders.

George Starr has literally lived decoys for several decades. Through these years he has accumulated samples from almost all the great makers, names like Holmes, Lincoln, and Crowell around here, Cranmer of New Jersey, the Wards of Maryland, Hudson from Virginia and scores more. In doing so, he has become friends of gunners and their friends and descendants until the lore of the ancient art of decoy making has become his as a carver of decoys himself. In his book he manages to pass on to the readers his enthusiasm and understanding until we, too, reopen this fascinating window on our heritage.